

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL DAVID L. COGGINS, USMC, CHIEF OF MOBILE TRAINING AND MENTORING TEAM FOR NCO LEADERSHIP, NATO TRAINING MISSION -- IRAQ VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 9:30 A.M. EST DATE: TUESDAY, JANUARY 22, 2008

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MR. JACK HOLT: Okay, Captain Gillis (ph) if the Colonel is ready I believe we can go ahead and get started.

CAPT. GILLIS (ph): Great, thank you.

COL. DAVID L. COGGINS: Hey, good morning. This is Lieutenant Colonel Dave Coggins. I'm calling from somewhere in Baghdad, Iraq and I have an opening statement I'd like to provide for you and I'll be really happy to participate in this forum.

So good morning, and this discussion presents me with a great forum to convey the progress in the NATO Training Mission-Iraq, that (is made ?) with assisting the Iraqi navy, specifically through the non-commissioned officers leadership corp. Our first course was established in response to a request from the Iraqi minister of defense to the commander in NATO of the Joint Force Command in Naples, just in August of 2007. I was excited because the training started in September, just a month later at Um-Qasr Navy Base on the southern coast of Iraq -- you know, on the northern Arabian Gulf. And the next course will be conducted by the Iraqi navy in February. But before I get into the details I'd like to provide an overview of the NATO Training Mission in Iraq. (Here-in after ?) I may refer to the NATO Training Mission-Iraq as NTMI, and then discuss more details of the Iraqi non-commissioned officer leadership training. NATO Training Mission-Iraq was founded in 2004 to assist the Iraqis in establishing an effective and enduring security sector by strengthening core skills in its military.

Now the mission initially focused on training, but over the last year it's progressed to advising and mentoring the Iraqis to establish a well-run sufficient institutions. Although the NATO Training Mission footprint in theater is not expanding, NTMI is developing to include new activities and other projects. One of the most significant projects, I think, was with the Iraqi navy and the training is instrumental in developing the leadership skills of the Iraqi navy's non-commissioned officers corp. The NCO corp is truly the backbone of any military branch, especially small unit leadership.

Now I headed the Iraqi non-commissioned officer leadership course and mobile training team, which consisted of three members: myself as the United States Marine; I had a Danish sergeant major with me; and the third member of my

team was a Royal Marine, United Kingdom captain. Now the first course was conducted in September. We had 10 Iraqi non-commissioned officers that were hand picked. They already had showed some signs of leadership and we helped to refine that.

I took the lessons noted from that, ran a second course in November with 15 students and we trained a training cadre that became train the trainers. Now the third course in last November was conducted by the Iraqi trainers themselves, with NATO as sponsors, mentors and coaches, if you will. We offered close support for them and continued to sustain them as they developed the capacity to do it themselves.

Now the goal of the course was to increase decision making and confidence building, with leadership skills and hands on training. We knew the course would eventually be run by the Iraqis so we had a goal of making it sustainable by the Iraqis. Now the course is built and incorporated into an effective framework that future Iraqi courses will be able to identify and use the related characteristics of good leadership in the Iraqi frame of reference, with their NCOs having key leadership positions.

Now in conclusion, I'll tell you that I'm very optimistic about the course being taught by the Iraqis next month under their leadership with NATO sponsorship. But we'll be mentors and not trainers. They've got it and I'm very excited about it. I think we may be seeing the beginning, maybe the bow-wave, towards success in the Iraqi navy, building a foundation, some framework and a pathway to future success.

I'm ready to take any questions and participate in the forum. MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much, Lieutenant David Coggins of the United States Marine Corps, chief of the Mobile Training and Mentoring Team for NCO Leadership, the NATO Training Mission-Iraq. And Jared, why don't you get us started.

MR. JARED FISHMAN: Yes sir, thank you for taking the time, Lieutenant Fishman. Obviously in the last few years we've seen that the differences between the U.S. file and NATO's file -- NCOs versus the Iraqi or Arab armies, which didn't really have NCOs, have any power in the past. And that was a big societal difference. Are you seeing any kind of change as far as that goes in your dealings with a more confident NCO corp?

COL. COGGINS: That's a really great question and I think a good observation as well (from the past ?). Going into this, when the Iraqi government requested, by name asked NATO to come give an NCO leadership training course to develop their own capacities with the clear goal of them taking it themselves within a few months, I think that as a going in position really was

part of their success. So they selected NCOs that had the capacity for leadership, that were literate, and volunteered.

Now I don't know if this is going to be a prerequisite for promotion because they're still developing their NCO corp. But as I left, each course -- we did three -- we could see a change just in the staff of the navy down at Um Qasr navy base and on ship; little subtle differences between NCOs standing apart from the jungi (ph) or the privates as they call them, giving commands, mission type orders. It's a beginning, but I really started to see some difference. So it was training that they requested so they definitely have the goal and the vision for making their non-commissioned officers be that vital backbone of small unit leadership. So with that, I think it's very encouraging.

MR. HOLT: Yes sir, and this is -- I'm Jack Holt with OSD new media and it seems that this happened pretty quick. Was it the fact that they had most of their participating NCOs -- those that they wanted the training -- to receive the training already hand -- already selected prior to you guys getting down there? Because it seems like you turned this around really, really quickly.

COL. COGGINS: You know, I would agree with you if we say it this way, that I think the Iraqis turned it around. It was really NATO sponsored and Iraqi led and now it's Iraqi owned and we're just coaching them. And we designed it so it would be sustainable, so we wouldn't show up, do something and then it'd be lost to history. We didn't want a false start. We wanted a touchdown.

MR. HOLT: All right, excellent. Now as far as their navy goes, what type ships are they working with?

COL. COGGINS: That's really a great question. To give you a framework, the Iraqi navy based at Um Qasr, you look there on the northern -- the edge of the northern Arabian Gulf and you would see five -- I think they're Chinese-made patrol boats, like the U.S. Osprey class, with German engines and with a deck mounted general purpose machine gun and they have small arms as well. So, not a big navy. They have some other boats, some Italian boats. They have plans for getting some larger vessels but they only have 1,200 sailors. They have really an operational squadron that they do 24/7 ops -- I'm sorry, 24 hours, seven days a week around the clock operations in their waters in the northern Arabian Gulf with the assistance of the Multinational Force-Iraq, which is the maritime component command of that as Task Force 158, that has the U.S., the U.K. and some others. So it's busy water out there and they're helping train the Iraqis. They're also doing real world operations with the Iraqis. The Iraqis are leading some boardings themselves. I witnessed some of that, but NATO's focus was training.

There's also the Multi-National Security Transition Command- Iraq, referred to as MNSTC-I, and they have a specialized navy transition team that focuses on training, the tactical way. We're in leadership way. So the NCOs that we saw were well prepared, they were hand picked, they were motivated and I think that we really just helped them refine their own leadership capabilities and give them a chance to role play and think about leadership in a new frame.

JARED: I have another question.

MR. HOLT: Yeah, go ahead, Jared.

MR. FISHMAN: Thanks. With the passage of the new de- Ba'athification law last week do you foresee that there would be some more either senior NCOs or junior officers coming back who used to be under Saddam's navy to kind of fill out and to bring some more expertise from the old days? Or, do you just kind of see this as moving forward with just brand new, you know, ensigns coming in who are 18, 20 years old and kind of starting all over from scratch?

COL. COGGINS: Yeah, that's really an Iraqi policy question. Great question for the Iraqi chief of staff of the navy and what their selection process is going to be for that. I'm not sure what the impact of that is going to be, but I know if I'm asked to continue to provide advice and training for the Iraqi NCOs we'll do our best to help them out.

MR. HOLT: Okay, and what are the basic core elements of a NATO program for leadership?

COL. COGGINS: The basic core programs for leadership, I think you might be surprised if I borrowed some of the ideas from the United States Marine Corps and how we assist our journalism training, how we assist our officers in training, how we help our privates. And I think the basis for leadership will be the same about anywhere you go. And one of the things we did, the first thing was, we gave out pieces of paper and a pencil and through an interpreter we said draw what you think leadership looks like and give us a few words and explain what you think.

And you know, they came up with what I think anybody would come up with: work hard, have patience and have faith in your leaders and take care of your men like your sons, like a shepherd takes care of its sheep. That's what they told me and I learned a lot from that. I don't think I'll ever forget that lesson.

MR. HOLT: That is a pretty impactful lesson, and right from the jump. Jared, do you have another question?

MR. FISHMAN: Sure, we can definitely keep going. What about -- have you found that there's enough support from the national government? I know Um Qasr is way down there, I guess on the southern tip. How is the interaction with the federal government back in Baghdad as far as supporting the navy and making sure that they have the types of supplies and support that they need to continue to build a stronger force?

COL. COGGINS: Yeah, that's a great question. I'll frame it for you. I think it's one of the busiest places of any waterway. They've got two oil platforms out there that they get 95 percent of their gross national product from, at .08 percent of the Iraqi defense dollar. So it's a tactical footprint but a strategic value and they're not down there alone, a lot of helpers.

The Iraqis are building their capacity. They had the gear to do the job. I saw -- of 1,200 sailors they have an imbedded marine battalion. The marines that I saw had some good equipment. They had good training, they had good hearts and they were willing to learn. And they did point defense on oil platforms. It gets pretty hot down there in the summer and pretty cold in the winter. And what I saw was some pretty tough guys.

MR. HOLT: So what is the typical rank structure? How are they structuring their 1,200 sailors as far as the NCO leadership?

COL. COGGINS: That's a good question. They start with really a joint boot camp, if you will. They have regional recruiting centers and regional training centers where if you come in as an enlisted man you come in, you go to their basic recruit training. It's about five weeks long, regardless of what service you're going to go into.

Then at some point you decide or you ask or you're allowed to go into a certain service, let's say the navy. You head down to Um Qasr, the navy base, and you start as a jungi (ph) or a private and you work your way up with time in grade. For example, you serve six months you're promoted to the next rank, private first class. Another six months, to the next rank.

So, they're trying to fill out their ranks to meet the requirements for their nation and their national defense. So that's a challenge -- and grade shaping and requirements for promotion and a lifelong continuum for the ones that stay in from private to sergeant major, from second lieutenant to general. Part of that development of the professional military education program (at

schools training ?) is something that NATO is providing advice for as well. Some of that has yet to be figured out but one thing is for sure, no unit is worth anything without good NCOs. So they've identified that, they've asked for help and now they have the capacity to do some of that on their own. I was really proud to be part of it with NATO.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Jared?

MR. FISHMAN: Yes sir, how about -- talk a little bit about what is on the more personal level, since you've been there, as far as -- I know that there haven't been really problems of the sectarian kind between Sunni or Shi'a or Kurd within the navy. And I think that that's kind of similar to the air force as well. But what's your personal impressions about how things have changed in the last few months as far as building one Iraqi country, one Iraqi navy which only supports the country as opposed to their own sectarian parties?

COL. COGGINS: From my experience with (three times down ?) from Baghdad to Um Qasr I had no problems. When I got down to Um Qasr the third time, I tell you I really felt like I was going home. These guys are in my heart. I've seen them work hard. I've seen them sweat. Part of our leadership training was them stand up in front of each other and lead physical training. We did some hand-to-hand fighting techniques just for camaraderie and fun. We really -- everybody enjoyed that. It brought us close together.

And you know, at the end of the day when your sitting around together with such a small group sharing a meal, it's really just a bunch of comrades, a bunch of warriors together with common interests: children, families. They want what's best for their country, for their families. I think I want the same thing. I think we all do. So it was personally a good thing for me to do and I think it's a good news story for NATO. It's definitely a good news story for the Iraqis, especially for the Iraqi navy and for their future.

MR. FISHMAN: Just a follow up about your own and personal impressions, obviously since you are on the ground in Baghdad and traveling down through the south and through, I guess passing Najaf and Karbala into the Shi'a lands, has there been any change since the time you were first in Iraq until today about -- just the impressions that you get when you travel around, just on your day-to-day life?

COL. COGGINS: That's a great question. I've been here twice before under different circumstances.

I'll tell you, I enjoy it a lot more now.

MR. HOLT: And how did the -- with the integration of the NATO training mission with the MultiNational Security Transition Command, the MNSTC-I command and their navy transition team -- how did you integrate that? Were there any issues there? Evidently not many or you wouldn't have been able to progress as fast as you did. But how did that work?

COL. COGGINS: I wouldn't agree with the term integration. I might phrase it this way. We work in cooperation with the MultiNational Security Transition Command-Iraq. An interesting -- one of the military principles is unity of command and we have that in that our commander is Lieutenant General James Dubik, United States Army. He's dual hatted, the commander of the NATO Training Mission- Iraq and also MNSTC-I.

So we have a unity of purpose. We have unity of command and we work in cooperation with MNSTC-I and their naval transition team. Sir, I'm on the phone with him or communicating with him almost every day. They have a lane that they focus on, the tactical training. We're helping with the development of leadership. So I think it's a great partnership. And the third partner in there is definitely the Iraqis, the Iraqi navy.

MR. HOLT: Excellent. And I know this is kind of a tactical question but what is the focus of the mission -- the mission focus for the Iraqi navy? Is it coastal patrolling, coastal security, oil platform security?

COL. COGGINS: Yeah, you've got it. Also I think I'd add in there, you know, maritime interdiction and things that navies do: fishing enforcement. We were out there one time, just on the way out to do training, kind of a tactical level thing, but the captain of the Iraqi boat, who I think was a lieutenant, he asked me, he said, "Sir, please, I must stop for a moment. I have something I have to do." I said well please, you do whatever you have to do, I'm just onboard for the ride, because we go from smaller boats out to a larger ship provided by the U.K. as our at-sea learning laboratory, if you will, where we conducted our training in the Northern Arabian Gulf.

And so I was interested in what he had to stop for. There was nothing wrong with the boat. And what had happened was some fishermen had tied their small boat, their dhow, had tied it on a navigational buoy and pulled it out of the channel. And he could look ahead and see that a tanker that was full was on its way out. And he did the right thing.

So he told these guys to get out of the way and then I noted that he yelled at them a little bit longer. And I -- well what is he yelling at? And they had the Iraqi flag on their dhow that they're required to fly upside down. And he said, this is not permitted. This is my country. I'm proud of my country. I'm proud of my flag. You get up there and you put the flag correctly. I heard that through the interpreter. He maybe didn't interpret every single word but that's the sense I got and then we were on our way.

So that was just a little small story of something that I saw. I was just very proud to be part of that. And instead of doing fishing enforcement they're doing maritime interdiction. We just took part in the training, the conceptual phase, the theoretical, the hands-on practical application. And that

will facilitate anything else that I think they need to deal with -- that foundation of good leadership.

MR. HOLT: All right. That's an excellent story there, sir. And so it sounds like as far as leadership training there's a wide variety or a wide range of topics and a pretty dynamic operation that they're going to have to be leading these -- leading their sailors through.

COL. COGGINS: Well yeah, you know, we're not talking about aircraft carriers with 7,000. We're talking about small boats and, you know, the focus of that small boat -- the brain may be the officer, the commander of the small vessel. But to get things done, you know, you need to have good NCOs out there. The Iraqis know that, that's why they've asked for the training. And even in the few times that I've gone back -- my former students, the graduates, I see them in the operational squadrons. I can know -- to me they just seem to look different.

MR. FISHMAN: Do you feel like just -- your gut level would say at some point in the near future the Iraqi government start to purchase larger patrol craft or maybe a destroyer class to be able to go up against other types of Iranian vessels or something of that sort?

COL. COGGINS: Well I think they have a plan to increase the capability they have now and that's -- I haven't been briefed on exactly what they're looking for. I think they have the right level of ambition. They have the right focus, the right context of what their missions are and I'm sure that's something that the chief of the Iraqi navy is working on and he probably has some really good advice too, as well, from the coalition.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Jared, anything else? MR. FISHMAN: No, that's great. Thank you, sir, for your time.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anybody else have any other questions? All right, sir. Well, thank you very much for joining us for the Bloggers Roundtable today. Lieutenant Colonel David L. Coggins, United States Marine Corps, is the chief of Mobil Training and Mentoring Team for the NCO Leadership, NATO Training Mission-Iraq. Thank you for joining us today, sir. A great news story. Thank you very much.

COL. COGGINS: Okay, thank you very much for letting me take part. Good day.

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